

International Conference on Education and Educational Psychology (ICEEPSY 2012)

Development of emotional competencies and reflective learning in communication courses

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**Abstract**

**Problem Statement:**

Recently there have been many efforts in higher education to foster student participation in the labor market in a targeted way.

A few years ago a variety of soft skills courses were introduced at our college. These courses offer an opportunity for the development of those social and personal competencies, which are expected by the labor market and can determine the entire educational and personal development in interaction with cognitive competencies.

**Research Methods:**

The present paper is based on a survey conducted among 200 college students who participated in Presentation and Business Communication courses. The aim of the survey was to find out the students' experiences, opinions about their own development as well as preferences and mood during classes. . .

**Findings:**

While feedback proved to be crucial on the one hand for qualitative reasons, on the other hand it can show how this learning experience can be beneficial in other areas. Student answers testify that "time flies" when the lessons are less structured and are more casual. Students do not just sit around and listen but can use their creativity as well, and by the means of group exercises they can also get to know each other better.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Dr. Zafer Bekirogullari of Cognitive – Counselling, Research & Conference Services C-crcs.

**Keywords:** reflective learning; self-knowledge; emotional competence; personal development; social competencies

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**1. The necessity of introducing modern disciplines**

As in other countries in the European Union, higher education programs in Hungary take the feedback they get from the labor market into consideration and try to include them in their educational content.

Unfortunately, it is typical of the Hungarian education system that it is extremely knowledge-based and regarding knowledge transfer and retention, the transition to the harmonization of competence development is very slow. As per the development of competencies, research proves that Hungarian schools do not offer sufficient time and

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support for students to master the most profound and vital competencies needed for studies in higher education. (See Falusi et al., 2011:181)

Instead of developing competencies, in many cases higher education programs try to fill in the gaps.

Legislations keep changing on a daily basis, but feedback from the labor market suggests that there is a lot of room for improvement in the area of content-free competencies.

The majority of these competencies belong to the elements of social and personal competencies. Emotional intelligence competencies are not innate abilities, but are acquired by learning and instruction. (Goleman et al., 2003:62). Such social competencies are the ability to cooperate or work in a team, which have many other social competence dependents such as the ability to communicate, show empathy, exhibit tolerance and the ability to handle conflict.

Social competence is a system of components applied through social interactions. It is influenced by personality issues, family patterns, behavior types and attitudes as well as factors originating in the school environment.

As the role of social function becomes weaker in the family environment, secondary education should pay more attention to tasks related to social skills development. The teacher's role as a model becomes vital, and so does the significance of social environment rich in stimuli and the range of activities where students can gain more experience. Accordingly, schools should provide a supportive learning environment where, via purposeful pedagogical management, exercises and activities that contribute to the development of social competencies are used. (Borosán, 2011:145-146)

From among the elements of the Personal Competency Inventory (Goleman-Boyatzis-Mckee, 2003:63-64) the development of self-awareness and correct self management have gained special importance, yet knowledge-based learning approaches have excluded them from the focus pedagogical aims for a long time.

Some statements from 50-60 years back according to which students' insufficient knowledge about professions or poor self-knowledge ended up in wrong / mistaken choice of profession (See also Noszlopi, 1939) still hold true. Hungarian employees are often blamed for not being flexible enough and lacking initiative. These abilities, such as proper self-knowledge, flexibility, initiative, are also elements of personal competence. They are also important for the practice of social competence in order to gain self-confidence and assertiveness.

Research has shown and also the annual Personal Hungary exhibits have emphasized that advanced emotional intelligence is a prerequisite by employers. Human resource managers and employment offices pay more attention to human and social qualities and the individual than they used to.

These emotional competencies are vital to be successful on today's labor market. They are not only essential in the world of work but are also important in many other situations of life. Altogether, as well as by interacting with the cognitive competencies, they determine educational and personal development.

Ideally, formal education should focus on the development of these emotional competencies. Aronson says,

Unfortunately, most parents and some school administrators believe that teaching basic academic skills should be the only mission of schools. I think that belief is shortsighted. Our schools can and should play a vital role in helping students develop emotional mastery as well as academic mastery. A school's social climate can do a great deal to either foster or hinder a student's skill in getting along with others. Schools can create a learning environment that not only deters violence, but also educates young people in emotional maturity and emotional intelligence. I believe that this is not only a worthwhile goal but that it is also vital for a youngster's full development. (Aronson 2001:91)

Expectations of everyday life have forced our college to introduce several new courses related to competence development a few years ago. The present study shows findings based on experience gained in Presentation and Writing Skills Development courses and Communication (Business Communication and General Communication) classes.

## **2. Competence Development Courses**

### **2.1. Presentation and Writing Skills Development course**

When we try to improve the presentation skills of students, we help them to present themselves in a pleasing manner, in a natural way where they use well-structured sentences and good illustrations.

Because in today's education the number of opportunities to improve presentation skills has shrunk, university students are dubious of giving even short oral presentations lasting only a few minutes. Reduced self-confidence, for example, is consequence of the limited number of opportunities for self-expression, which can affect performance in and out of the classroom environment.

The ability to compose a text, which directly contributes to a successful presentation, equally requires the ability to comprehend written text. It is no wonder that these two competencies are top-priority areas in the Educational Program of the National Development Plan (See also Pála, 2006). Being the prerequisites of the learning process and also being vital for oral and written communication, the significance of these competencies exceeds all other subjects. Consequently, we can point out with certainty that focused presentations skills development does not only offer opportunities but is also needed for the efficiency of an overall personal competence development.

## **2.2. Communication courses**

By developing communication skills we also improve our ability to express ourselves, become more efficient in interpersonal relations, increase our self-confidence, and can understand and make ourselves understood more easily so that we can represent our goals appropriately.

An advanced level of the ability to cooperate is a prerequisite for constructive behavior, which is vital for the harmony between social aims and individual values.

In the course of practicing cooperation we learn to plan, organize, decide adjust, and assist others. With these skills we enhance the broadening of our own personality in which our goals and interests guide us. (Borosán, 2011:146)

Business Communication classes and Communication Lab classes were directed in a structured group class fashion. One of the features of this form of work was the processing of a structured, predetermined body of information in which participants gained personal experience. The other characteristic of these structured group meetings is that there is a strictly prescribed program to follow, containing usually the following five components: getting attuned/ creating a good atmosphere/ mood, goal setting, processing information, application of new skills and the preparation of the coming-up meeting. (Szilágyi K., 2007:257) The processing of information includes exercises based on a certain content. In pair work and small group activities participants learn from and about each other and, as a consequence, about themselves. In the course of the exercises self –reflection is purposely emphasized and enhanced by the teacher (instructor). Application refers to participants' own wording of what has been learned in the class and can be completely different compared to other participants, depending on individual needs, interests or experiences. Feedback is also very important for the teacher. In-class activities and exercises are reinforced by homework assignments in which participants write down their personal experiences. Such means of reflection enhance the building of appropriate self-knowledge. Moreover, by getting to know their peers better, the social competence of participants will also develop.

Considering that the teacher is in the role of facilitator, and the students are the main protagonists, the classes are very different from the traditional fashion. Seating is also unusual, which means that the classroom has to be rearranged at the beginning of every occasion. By sitting in a circle, participants can see each other very well. The teacher/ instructor is in charge of the class, but he does not dominate as it would be the case in a traditional frontal classroom discourse: he appears as an equal member in the circle. The schedule of the activities is very strict as there are many exercises that follow each other in certain time sequence. Both pair work and small group work activities make all participants work hard and pay close attention. There is no room for boredom. The frame of the class and the selection of the tasks enhance the interest and attention and enforce what has been learned in class.

## **3. Research based on skills development**

### **3.1. Presentation Skills classes (2008, 2009, 2012)**

In the spring of 2008 we launched a survey among our students at the Faculty of Commerce, Catering and Tourism to find out about their experiences as well as the assumed and actual effects of the course. Participation was voluntary. We used online surveys, which also proved to be an especially useful experience for us.

On the basis of our conclusion of the 2008 survey, we repeated the survey in paper-based surveys. Students of the Faculty of Foreign Trade were also invited to participate in the survey in which we had a sample of 104 students (Jármai and Szokács, 2009).

Respondents (from both schools) took the communication course in German (41%), English (24%), Hungarian (14%), Spanish (11%) and French (10%). We also have to point out that the quality of the final presentations were not related to student language proficiency. Moreover, students with solid language proficiency often made mistakes in their presentations due to lack of competencies not related to language competence (e.g. self-confidence) or the other way round: students with limited language competencies also came up with strong presentations in terms of usefulness of content, smartness of visual effects or interesting styles.

The survey sheet contained two open-ended questions and a list of 24 items related to class work activities centering on self-knowledge and the knowledge of classmates. (Figure 1)



Figure 1

On a five-point scale to what extent do you agree with the statements?

(%) (N=104) Legends:

Red: activity related statements

Green: interpersonal statements

Yellow: statements related to self-knowledge

Blue: related to self-knowledge where low figures are favorable

Students rated the statements on a five-point scale, evaluating the relevance of the items. (See also Palásthy, 2003:97) The answers to the questions disclosed motives that were important when choosing a course and also introduced student expectations and comments and even criticism regarding their own progress. Taking our findings into consideration we were able to make changes in the course material and the methodological tools.

The first question in the survey asks why the student in question chose this particular course. The second part of the survey contained statements that students were asked to mark on a 5 point scale, depending on what they could personally relate to themselves. The participating teachers succeeded in offering an activity-based class. Their success is also proven by the fact that students have gained knowledge that they would not have gained in other lessons. Some of the statements related to the class activities were highly scored, which is proof that students

succeeded in actively participating in the classes and also in gaining new experiences that differed from other classes.

Action as an essential criterion gave learning a feature different from passive perception. Active participation is the main cornerstone of ideal learning. Students' responses seem to appreciate and confirm this kind of approach of their teachers. There are plenty of opportunities to participate (81%) and talk (75%) in these classes (Figure 1). If we compare the data of interpersonal statements (green) with those of self-knowledge statements (yellow), we can see that the development of social competencies scored higher and was more successful.

In the second open question we asked the students what they thought about the lessons in general. The "I enjoyed taking part in the lesson" statement could be agreed with by underlining the answer "Yes" or disagreed with by underlining the answer "No". There was also a third option: "Neutral". Following this, they were also asked to give a short explanation for their answers. From an educational point of view, this was probably the most useful part of the questionnaire. We had 86 answer of "Yes", 1 "No" and 16 "Neutral" (Figure 2)

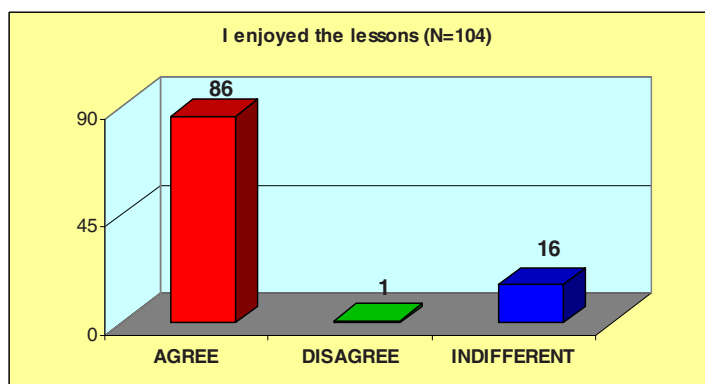


Figure 2  
Frequency of lessons enjoyed

Students' answers illustrated that time flies when the lessons are less structured and are more casual. They did not just sit and listen but could use their creativity as well, and throughout the group exercises they also got to know each other better.

Students found it especially useful to immediately put into practice what they had just learned in the lesson. They learned a lot of tips and had picked up good ideas learning from each others' presentations – both about the various methods of presentation and also about how to choose a good topic. Some of them thought that one lesson a week was not sufficient.

The group exercises that require students to actively participate are excellent opportunities for them to overcome stage fright and anxiety.

With regards to self-knowledge and social competencies, many students said that they had learned more from their own mistakes – they were less judgmental of each other and they got to know each other from a different perspective.

In spring 2012 we also conducted some studies in Presentations Skills Courses on another campus of BBS where the language of instruction was English.

### 3.2. Surveys on English language Presentation Courses

On the basis of data collected in the English language Presentation classes at Budapest Business School, College of Business Administration Zalaegerszeg in written interviews we focused on three questions in spring 2012 (N=20).

Question One read: "In what skills have you made the most progress?"

There were two areas in which students claimed to have made progress due to the newly acquired knowledge by choosing Presentation skills in English, and had become more aware of the criteria needed for the development of presentation skills.

Some students pointed out that they did not think they were good presenters yet, and that they knew what they needed get better. Student personal competence improved as they consciously tried to defeat stage fright and anxiety in order to gain self confidence in return. In both areas self- reflection and self-assessment appeared to play a significant role, the achievement of which means they had gotten on the road to success in the learning process. Furthermore, it is worthwhile asking students about their motivation, as well as short term goals and long term goals regarding the course. In addition, it is useful to survey students about their progress even during the course. Students should be encouraged to think about the results of their learning efforts. It is crucial to separate achievements from marks /grades.

Question Two was related to the benefits of written and oral exams. The variety of answers testifies to the different needs, strengths and weaknesses and even expectations or priorities of students. The answers constitute good feedback for the teacher and point out the significance of taking student diversity and concomitant details into consideration when it comes to lesson planning. In addition to the significance of skills training it was good to read about the success some students achieved during hands-on activities. E.g. "I've found out that even my own thoughts can be interesting, good and worthy of attention". This comment clearly testifies that the student made a conclusion based on real-life experience.

Question Three was related to student future goals regarding wishes for further development. Student replies provided information on two things. First, they reflected their level of self- knowledge, namely they were able to point out additional needs for improvement. Only 1 student out of 20 did not answer this question, validating the premise that students are well aware of their own abilities and limitations. The second pointed out the knowledge of the subject matter and development opportunities offered by the course. Some students would like to work on clarity, others on accuracy and even other would like to improve eye contact. Considering the realm of personal competencies, the highest values were attributed to overcoming stage fright, which in spite of all the well-known techniques, needs more practice and class time. The above findings are significant also for teachers of other courses so that they can increase and enhance their teaching strategies according to didactical aspects as interdisciplinarity is not limited to overlapping course content but also the development of the same personal and social competencies in different courses.

### **3.3. Description of research on communication-related courses**

The aim of researching communication-related courses was to find out student opinion with a degree of precision on (and get feedback about) the content of the classes, the teacher's work and the effect of the class experience.

The present study shows some of the findings of the surveys we conducted with our students at the end of the last two semesters (December 2011 and May 2012).

A total of 119 students pursuing Bachelor of Arts studies or community school studies, aged 18-22, participated in the survey.

We used a five-point Likert scale to evaluate the responses while in other cases we wanted to find out to what extent students agreed with certain statements regarding the classes.

In the frequency survey we tried to find out the positive or negative effects of class activities and the class atmosphere, the role of homework, teacher attitude. We devoted special attention to feedback on the effect of pair work and small group work activities. Actually, we wanted to find out to what extent students coming from a variety of settlements in the region were familiar with our task types and activities, to what extent they appreciated or rejected them.

Figure 3 shows a ranking based on the responses in regards to frequency. Students were to choose from 5 categories. I don't know = 0, Almost never = 1, Rarely = 2, Often = 3, Almost always = 4. The final average shows that teacher attitude was mainly marked as OFTEN or ALMOST ALWAYS. The degree of the tasks being interesting or not and active class participation (which was due to the task types and the form of class work) were also ranked in a similar fashion. At the bottom of the list we can see statements that were ranked as ALMOST NEVER by students. This is good news as otherwise it would be discouraging regarding the teacher's work if students felt anxiety in class or could not see the point of the class activities/ exercises or class participation. (Figure 3)



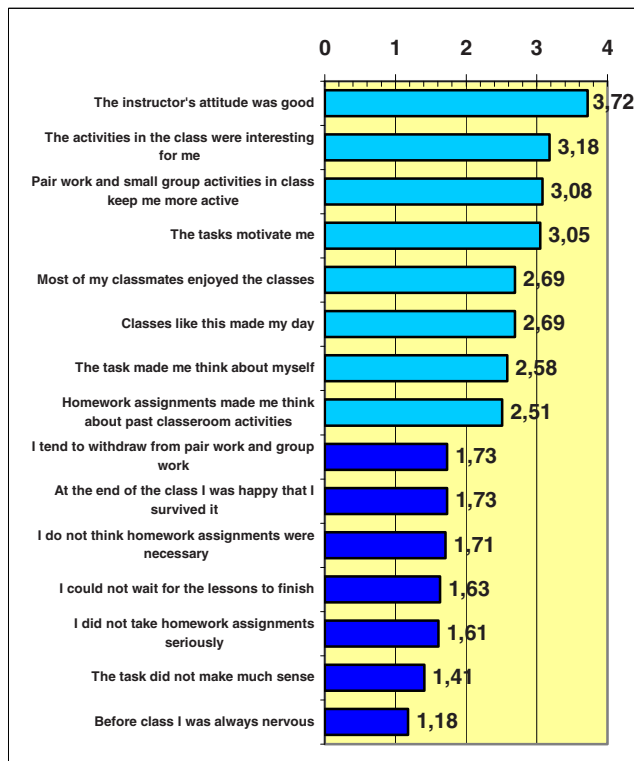


Figure 3  
Frequency indicators in communication classes  
(N= 119) (average)

Pair work and small group work, the variety of activities and the continuous involvement of students in the activities proved to be so very efficient and successful that our aim was achieved. It is vital for students to be active participants in the activities and to be given the opportunity to experience those activities first hand to ensure as much positive emotional experience as possible.

School experiences are at least as important in student education as the weight of the subject matter they study. Positive experiences influence student physical-spiritual and mental well-being and health in crucial ways. Alternatively, lack of self-confidence, aggression, and lack of motivation occur. Moreover, lack of trust in the school as an institution, its participants, its transferred content and the represented values can turn things averse. (Hunyadyne and Nádas, 2011:209)

Ideally, the collection of positive experiences should start in the public school system; however, expectations regarding adults are the same. Negative school experiences / Bad memories from school can be neutralized and in other ways adults can be assisted in finding the joy of learning. We know from the Hungarian-born psychology professor Mihály Csíkszentmihályi that learning is not supposed to be an unpleasant activity. In his book titled *The Evolving Self. A Psychology for the Third Millenium* he writes that creative people, high achievers, and talented young people find joy in their activities and this enjoyment inspires them to keep learning. We strongly agree with Csíkszentmihályi when he suggests that the experience of flow should be applied in the school environment as well. (See also Csíkszentmihályi 2009:241)

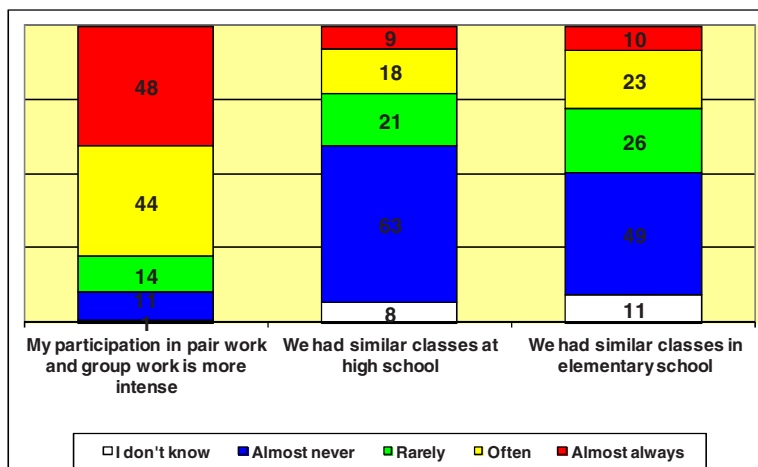


Figure 4

Evaluation of communication classes as regards to former pair work and group work compared with former experiences (N=119)

The majority of students did not participate in experience-enriched pair work or small group activities even in elementary school. Cooperation is an inevitable expectation nowadays. The era of lonely inventors is over and thus at today's level of scientific development only team work can be efficient. This is why learning to work in a team is just as important as the methods of acquiring knowledge. (Kollár 2002:221) In other words, we do not expect young people to learn algebra on their own, to become violin virtuosos without instruction, however, we seem to think that children will learn the rules of cooperation, all we need is to let them work together at school. (Aronson, 2009:110) Sadly, we have found out that the respondents did not report on experience in communication-enhancing forms of work even in foreign language classes in spite of the fact that language classes claim to develop and improve communicative competence. We wonder what forms of activities our colleagues have used if two thirds of the students were lacking experience in cooperative learning. (Figure 5)

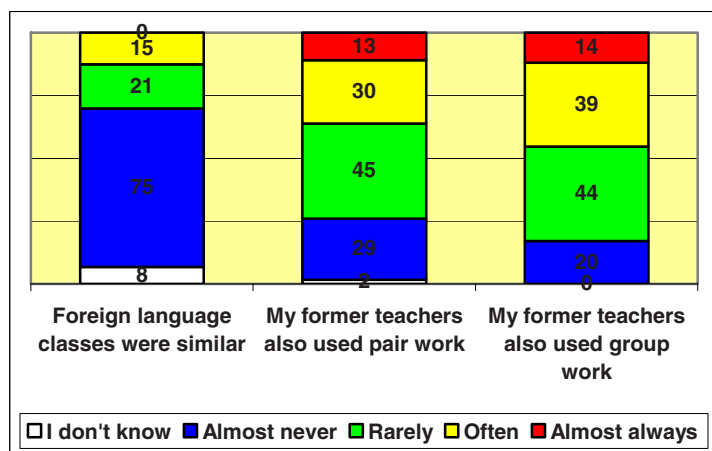


Figure 5

Evaluation of communication classes as regards to pair work and group work compared with former experiences (N=119)

During group work all students have opportunity to participate in the activities of the class. This way we sufficiently enhance the formation of social habits. Habits as learned components, in order to be activated,



presuppose the preparation of social situations. In other words, they become habits through the innervations of social activities which manifest themselves in social situations.

We can secure this by the application of tasks, activities, educational methods and activity forms that presuppose social interaction. When forming habits, it is crucial to point out our expectations regarding the actual implementation of behavior. Moreover, we also have to make sure that the expectations are adjusted to the individual and age-related idiosyncrasies. (Borosán, 2011:145)

Self-reflection and homework assignments were responsible for raising awareness in the purpose and significance of the tasks. Additional related findings need some shaping. However, the subjective accounts in homework assignments are very encouraging. They confirm us that regarding the thematic and methodological structure of the courses we are on track.

### Conclusion

The findings reveal that transferring knowledge and the development of competencies are taking place in a complex, integrated way both directly and indirectly while the teacher's personality and behavior are crucial factors from the point of view of successful and efficient learning. Moreover, the significance of Roger's concept about the teacher's role as facilitator is confirmed (Zrinszky, 1997:142); however Gordon's thoughts, according to which the success of the teaching-learning process is determined by communicative relations, classroom atmosphere and the methodological level of teaching, are also valid. Furthermore, it is the teacher's job to keep up students' level of curiosity and provide cheerful even playful activities in the classroom. These approaches presume process orientation to teaching where the application of knowledge also appears as opposed to the content-centered approach which focuses on a well-detailed, objective and unquestionable transfer of knowledge (See also Neelands, 1994, Vermunt 2012).

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